

Fault lines appearing in Singapore's social fabric?

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We have often been fed the perspective that free speech, and particularly the Internet, hold the capacity to drive our society asunder. Instances of hate speech online have often been dredged up to prove the point that, left to its own devices, the Internet will fan the flames of racism and tear the delicate social fabric that the pioneer generation took pains to weave.

The Internet was to be the evil bullet that shattered the china bowl. But has a particular section of Singaporeans become prejudiced overnight due to easily accessible material online, or was it the unprecedented freedom of the Internet that gave a soapbox for people to air long held prejudices?

One of the [findings in the latest Institute of Policy Studies \(IPS\) study](#) was that Muslims and Protestants were most concerned about moral issues. A good example of how this concern fleshed itself out on the Internet is this quiet and increasingly visible post on [rilek1corner.com](#), a blog that likely managed by followers of Islam.

What started as a public response from Subway Singapore in 2010, indicating that the restaurant chain would not be serving halal food, was dug up by [rilek1corner](#) to [receive another public airing](#). In particular, the blog entry focused on the comments made by someone who appears to be a Caucasian male, who supported the decision by Subway.

So, is it the “Ang Mo’s” fault for being insensitive to the religious dynamics in Singapore? Or is it a case where Muslims are too quick to play the victim card and fervently defend their beliefs at the slightest provocation?

It may not be an accurate aggregate of how any particular demographic feels but this online incident demonstrates the range of diverse opinions and how, when it comes to issues of race and religion, Singapore might be tolerant rather than harmonious.

When foreigners behave badly, as seen in the [Sun Xu incident](#), defending the nation's pride is quickly overtaken by xenophobic slurs. And who can forget the [case of Amy Cheong](#), causing a massive controversy where Singaporeans swiftly denounced her actions, to the extent that their hatred for her eventually forced her to leave the country.

It would be foolish to base conclusions on individual events, but equally foolish to delude ourselves in thinking that we get along as well as our forefathers.

If religious harmony is so vital to our nation's survival – it falls under both Social and Psychological Defence – why aren't we having open and honest discussions in a civil environment outside of academia or Parliament? Various government agencies and politicians

are quick to shut down any conversation as race and religion are deemed too sensitive to discuss for fear of recreating Maria Hertogh style riots.

NTUC lost a great teachable moment by its swift dismissal of Amy Cheong. Instead of counselling and providing her emotional support, it instead chose to drop her and the accompanying issues like a hot potato. Will this type of action help to foster an inclusive and caring society? I think not.

There is an urgent need for honest and unbiased examination of what constitutes religious and racial harmony even at the risk of making many people uncomfortable. It is exactly such discomfort that has allowed ignorance and prejudice to hide and fester – we are beginning to see the results of all this negativity.

Only then can we start to mend the tears in Singapore's social fabric before it is completely ripped apart. Or perhaps it is time to weave a new social fabric with higher quality and more resilient material.

These are the issues that society needs to tackle as our young nation matures and seeks to forge her identity. Hiding behind a curtain of silence, perpetuated by a restricted media, is not going to help.